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# **Welche Macht darf es denn Sein? Tracing 'Power' in German Foreign Policy Discourse**

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## **Introduction**

This article examines different uses of 'power' in the discourse on German foreign policy, specifically their deployment as role conceptions for a united Germany. It picks up observations by Gunther Hellmann (2002; 2006; 2013; 2016) and others (Roos 2012; Roos and Rungius 2016) that German foreign policy discourse and practice has slowly but steadily moved towards accepting 'power' as part of its role identity. This is a significant departure from characterisations of German foreign policy prominent in the 1980s, which attributed Germans a 'forgetfulness of power' and even a 'fear of [having] power' (Schwarz 1985; Schöllgen 1993). Of course, role images are very broad and do not capture the intricacies and complexities of foreign policy decision-making and practices. And yet, they matter precisely because, as simplified representations, these images function as mental shortcuts that purport to capture the character and core features of a state and its behavior in international relations (Holsti 1970). The aim of this article is to take a closer look at the development of the role image of Germany as a particular kind of power, which necessarily entails an understanding of Germany having power, or being powerful in a particular way.

Specifically, the article sketches the evolution through the use of three prominent conceptions – *constrained/tamed power*, *civilian power* and *hegemon/hegemonic power* – and the recent emergence of a new one – *shaping power*. Using the notion of 'basic concepts' as an analytical frame, the article reviews how these labels have emerged as popular categories in the German foreign policy discourse to give meaning to Germany's position in international relations. We discuss their appeal from a historical and aspirational angle, as well as their instability and contested nature. While the discourse on German foreign policy encompasses many voices,

this article focuses primarily on influential writings of scholars working at the intersection of academic and policy world who address not only an academic audience but also intervene in and (seek to) shape the broader political discourse. As such, we look primarily at what might be considered the academic innovators and promoters of these images, less at the extent to which they are adopted by government officials. Only in the case of the most recent expression, the *Gestaltungsmacht*, which has yet to form into a solid image, we also look at treatments in documents published by the German government.<sup>1</sup>

Tracking the discursive deployment and evolution of the concept of 'power' in this way is first and foremost a descriptive stocktaking exercise. Yet, it allows us to draw out three important observations: First, these role images have an important normative function and so their formulation is aimed at advancing a particular image Germany wants (not) to be seen as. Second, notions of being a certain type of 'power' are often characterized by the prefix attached to them, which places the focus on particular kinds of resources and practices. Little attention has been paid to the concept of power as a relational form, expressed in terms of being exercised and recognized, which limits the analytical value of these labels. Third, we suggest that 'shaping power' has the potential to establish itself as a new basic concept and role identity for Germany if it is distinctively defined as a form of 'power with/to' that can be contrasted with a form of 'power over', which for historical reasons has a negative connotation both in Germany and amongst its neighbours.

## **Framework**

### ***Role Images as Basic Concepts***

Central to our analysis is that the role images used in the discourse on German foreign policy are not mere labels but concepts.<sup>2</sup> A concept is an abstract frame that helps generating knowledge about the (our) world by organising, naming and giving meaning to particular aspects of that world. Following Koselleck, a 'basic concept' [*Grundbegriff*] plays a central role in our socio-political language and is

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<sup>1</sup> Our approach here overlaps with a recent article by Maull (2018). However, Maull is himself a prominent participant in the discourse and ultimately concerned with defending the label he coined. Thus, he also is a subject of our analysis.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of concepts, which informs this section, see Berenskoetter (2017).

considered 'indispensable to any formulation of the most urgent issues of a given time' (Koselleck 1996: 64). It is a leading term [*Leitbegriff*] of our vocabulary that attempts to categorize and grasp important features of the world we experience and live in. As such, it is used as a keyword [*Schlüsselwort*] and a slogan [*Schlagwort*] by major social, economic and political organisations and movements and their ideologies, but also plays an important role in scholarly analysis as a core term in major theories (Koselleck 2011 [1972]: 8). Thus, basic concepts operate in both socio-political *and* academic discourse. In the former realm they guide thought and action of individuals and collectives across society and function as 'categories of practice' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 1). In the latter realm basic concepts are used as central analytical categories in logical reasoning and in guiding empirical study.

To capture this overlap, this article looks primarily at writings by academics that seek to introduce or shape a basic concept not simply for scholarly analysis but for the wider discourse on German foreign policy. Tracing these writings can take two forms: a more descriptive approach that reconstructs how a concept has developed over time, or a decidedly critical angle that shows the political effects of conceptual language. We limit ourselves to the first approach. That said, we go beyond a mere description of *when* particular readings emerge in also assessing *why* they did, thus considering the purpose, or function, of a basic concept, which touches on its performative aspects.

Reconstructing the evolution of a concept in foreign policy discourse requires some analytical bearings. As Koselleck (2011 [1972]) highlights, the ability of basic concepts to guide thought and action is due to their temporal structure containing a stock of experiences and an aspirational outlook, that is, to its ability to raise 'innovative expectations'. Their formulation always takes place against a meaningful historical background, whereas the aspirational aspect points to the normative content of a concept/role in two ways: by projecting an image that the actor wants to become and 'live up to' and by raising behavioral expectations associated with that image. This makes them political. More generally, basic concepts gain meaning, are stabilized and contested within a particular socio-

political context. For the role images of states, this context encompasses both the internal (domestic) and the external (international) realm, and so the emergence and evolution of role images, including their temporal content, must be understood within these contexts.<sup>3</sup>

Crudely put, conceptual change occurs, first, through the loss of plausibility of existing concepts which cannot grasp new or unexpected events and experiences and, second, through the strategic usefulness of a new concept, supported by its ability to absorb diverse perspectives and an intuitive resonance (for a more nuanced discussion, see Steinmetz 2007: 188-191). One might say that demand for new conceptual language arises when circumstances change, when an actor finds itself in unfamiliar circumstances. However, change in language does not simply follow and adjust to material changes or new practices. Concepts are invented and promoted, which in the realm of foreign and security policy is a decidedly political act. This is particularly relevant if we keep in mind their aspirational/normative quality. As Koselleck famously put it, concepts are not only *indicators of* but also *factors in* change, which in turn implies that concepts *do* something. They have a performative side. In guiding the thinking and behaviour of actors and organisations and, thus, influencing decisions, actions and social relations, an emerging concept is implicated in bringing about the change it ‘describes’. There is no simple causal logic at play. In the case at hand, this means that a new image of Germany as a particular kind of ‘power’ does not simply emerge because commentators recognize that an existing image insufficiently captures the state’s material configuration and its foreign policy practices. Rather, because of their prescriptive quality, a new role image may be promoted domestically and/or internationally to pressure the government to change the basic premises of German foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> In short, new concepts are created to *both* capture and bring about change.

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<sup>3</sup> On the concept-context link more generally, see Berenskoetter (2017); on the relational nature of role images, see McCourt (2014), chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> On the relevance of the domestic political system for the process of “role selection and contestation”, see Brummer and Thies (2015).

Finally, we adopt the view that basic concepts and the role images in which they are embedded evolve gradually. This is in line with the view that the language and practices associated with a particular identity are difficult and slow to change. It also takes into account that post-war German foreign policy has shown resistance to radical change, expressed in the governments' proclamation of 'continuity' as a core principle. Analytically, this means we should observe the stretching of popular concepts as well as links to and overlaps with new concepts, rather than swift replacements.

### ***Power as a Basic Concept***

Few would dispute that 'power' is a basic concept. And from Hans Morgenthau's comprehensive treatment in *Politics Among Nations* to Joseph Nye's writings on 'soft power', scholars of International Relations (IR) have long tried to speak to both academic and foreign policy audiences when discussing the nature and use of power. Our analysis of its evolution in the discourse on German foreign policy is guided by four conceptual insights.<sup>5</sup>

First, 'power' is essential to agency. To be an agent in a meaningful sense one has to have some form of 'power', and different forms of power are associated with different forms of agency. In interstate relations, these forms are captured in role images such as 'hegemon', 'great power', 'middle power', etc. that states associate with or seek recognition for. And as noted earlier, a particular role generates expectations about corresponding behavior. That is, if a state is depicted as a particular kind of power, the expectation is that this state, or rather, its government is able and willing to act correspondingly. Closely related, second, power is exercised. Power is often casually described as a property – i.e. one either has power or not. This makes it easy to think of it in terms of an aspiration, but it also misleads to think of power primarily in terms of resources. Yet power is the ability to use resources in an effective way, it is a process that connects resources to outcomes. Third, rather than seeing power simply emerging out of the mobilization of domestic resources, power can reside in and be expressed through

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<sup>5</sup> For extensive discussions of meanings and uses of 'power' see Baldwin (2012); Barnett and Duvall (2005); Berenskoetter (2007); Guzzini (1993; 2016).

international structures. In fact, power can be conceptualized as a structural phenomenon in which individual agents matter very little, their roles reduced to a function of a given script. However this extreme conception is not very plausible for depicting a state's foreign policy. A more sensible reading highlights how agency is exercised through structural forces, including the ability to use them to one's advantage, as captured in Susan Strange's notion of structural power (Strange 1988; also Guzzini 1993).

Fourth, for analysts of international politics, at least, power is best understood in relational terms. It is expressed not simply through behavior *as such*, in the ability to act in one way or another through the mobilization of domestic resources or international structures, but on the effect this has on Selves and Others and the configuration of a relationship. Crudely put, this expression can take two forms: (a) 'power over', which shows a hierarchical relationship marked by coercion and control. In this conception of power as, essentially, a form of domination, power shifts are seen as playing out in a zero-sum game, i.e. if one state gains 'power over' something, another loses. Very differently, the reading of (b) 'power to/with' depicts a form of power as productive, a creative or enabling force that emerges out of cooperation. It sees power relations as configurations in which all involved become empowered or, to stay with the game-theoretical language, it shows international relations as a positive-sum game.

Equipped with this analytical framework we now can track the evolution of Germany as a 'power' in the foreign policy discourse. In doing so we expect that the meaning content of this role is affected not only by the geopolitical context in which Germany is situated but also by the historical context, providing it with a certain historical 'baggage', which together inform the formulation of an aspirational image, a role Germany should (want to) play. Furthermore, we expect that academically trained voices will formulate this concept through a particular theoretical (realist, liberal, etc) lens. A question kept in mind throughout, although not systematically explored, is whether advocacy of a particular concept is accompanied by an effort of applying it analytically and reflecting on its empirical

validity. In other words, is the use of certain role images of 'German power' grounded in actual measurement of German power?

## **The evolution of Germany as a 'power'**

### ***Constrained Power***

Conceptions of post-war Germany's 'power' are usually formulated with reference to (i) the historical backdrop in which Germany has exercised power in extremely violent and destructive ways and (ii) an account of the current and future world in which Germany is situated and the 'challenges' this world poses. The historical experience of two World Wars and the responsibility for the Holocaust exerted, and continues to exert, a dominant influence on formulations of 'German power': It created a context in which 'power' had a 'hard' connotation and meant military aggression and dominance. Both within German society and in European collective memory more widely, a 'powerful' Germany was not seen as a good thing. Consequently, in the effort to define the identity of the 'new' Germany in opposition to the 'old' (pre-45) one, German foreign policy was not to be understood in terms of 'power politics'. Germans were wary of having their state and its appearance associated with the very term, reflected in Hans-Peter Schwarz' (1985) diagnosis of a 'Forgetfulness of Power', and in Gregor Schöllgen's (1993) decision to entitle his book on German foreign policy 'Afraid of Power' (see also Hacke 1993).

Correspondingly, most conceptions of German power during the Cold War<sup>6</sup> highlighted the significant constraints on German foreign policy (Schwarz 1975; see also Hanrieder 1967; 1989). References were typically made to Germany's precarious geopolitical position; its security dependence on the US; its decentralised and constrained political structure; its integration in European and transatlantic institutions and a significant amount of scepticism towards the 'new' Germany amongst its neighbours and allies, as well as in German media and society (Schwarz 1985; 1994). To be sure, the economic 'miracle' gave Germany significant clout as a trading state, prompting Chancellor Helmut Schmidt in 1969

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<sup>6</sup> In this period 'Germany' refers to the Federal Republic.



to describe Germany's role in the world economic system as that of a 'world power' (cited in Hacke 1996: 10; see also Czempiel 1979). Yet such references were rare and paired with the New York Times' characterization of Germany as "an economic giant, a political dwarf" (NYT 1971).

There are basically two readings of Germany as a constrained power. For realist scholars like Morgenthau (1980), Schwarz (1985; 1994) and Schöllgen (1993), operating with a conception of power as control over military resources and the ability to make sovereign decisions, the constraints were a fundamental weakness. Morgenthau acknowledged that "truncated West Germany has become the most important economic and military power west of the Elbe River" yet emphasized its "inability to pursue an independent foreign policy" and saw dim prospects for an "active foreign policy" (Morgenthau 1980: 244-5). In the same vein, Schwarz argued that Germany's integration into multilateral structures and security dependence on the US meant that the government was effectively unable to make sovereign decisions about the use of military force and impose its will on others (Schwarz 1985: 63-71, 116-7).

In contrast, the concept of 'tamed power' developed by Peter Katzenstein (1997) highlights an entangled but mutually constitutive relationship between German power and its institutional context in Europe. Although the term was rarely used in German foreign policy discourse (but see Schwarz 1985; 1994; also Paterson 2010), the underpinning concept appeared under different names (discussed later). Coming from a liberal constructivist angle, Katzenstein speaks of the "institutionalization of power" in Europe as taking "the hard edges off power relations" (Katzenstein 1997: 3). In this picture, Germany is portrayed as a 'semi-sovereign' state that nevertheless exercises power, but "in multilateral, institutionally mediated systems" (Katzenstein 1997: 4). These systems allow states to project their power 'softly' while simultaneously being shaped by them (Katzenstein 1997: 3-6).<sup>7</sup> As such, 'tamed power' highlights the enabling aspects

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<sup>7</sup> Katzenstein notes it is thus a mistake to decide between a simplistic view of a 'Germanization' of Europe and the vision of a 'Europeanization' of Germany. Instead he sees a more complicated and ambiguous pattern 'linking Germany and Europe' (Katzenstein, 1997: 1).

of integration and Germany using indirect institutional means to pursue its objectives, showing a more complex set of relationships in which Germany is also empowered and transformed.

### ***Civilian Power***

The notion of civilian power first appeared in François Duchêne's much discussed reflection on Europe in 1973 (Duchêne 1973). Towards the end of the 1980s Hanns Maull adopted the concept from his friend and former superior at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) to capture what he considered to be the evolution of a different principal logic of world politics (see Maull 2014a: 121-3). It subsequently entered both political (see Volmer 1998; Rinke 2006; Herkendell 2012) and academic discourse and was redefined and specified by a group of scholars around Maull (see Maull 2014a: 125-39; also Tewes 2002).

The role image of 'civilian power' combines the idea of the trading state (Rosecrance 1986) with a commitment to a civilian, law-based, international order. Adopting Norbert Elias' thesis of the civilizing process to the realm of international politics, the prefix signals a specific objective. It depicts foreign policy actors that seek to 'civilize' international relations through international cooperation, apply economic means and strengthen international law. Initially, Maull (1990) explicitly defined 'civilian power' in opposition to traditional (realist) readings of 'great powers'. Applied to Germany and Japan, it reflected the perceived historical lesson that brute military force does not pay and emphasized the postwar experience of cooperation and influence through economic means. He presented it as the prototype of a "new type of international power", reiterating Duchêne's narrative of a 'civilizing process' in Europe and Rosecrance's reflections on the evolution of the 'trading state' in a new era of growing interdependence. Maull not only argued that Germany and Japan had become civilian powers, he also used the concept to capture "a particular foreign policy orientation" he considered politically desirable in a changing world (Maull 2014a: 121-122). Indeed, civilian power can be read as an explicit commitment to multilateralism. In this sense, Henning Tewes presents it as a pragmatic-normative approach to international relations, "the prescription of new forms of international

governance geared toward an era in which nation states cannot unilaterally fulfill the tasks which once sustained their existence” (Tewes 2002: 11). Looking back, Maull notes “it was this normative dimension of the civilian power concept that made it politically attractive” (Maull 2014a: 125).

With the end of the Cold War the concept became attractive in Germany not only because it acknowledged Germany’s status as an economically prosperous state and pictured its favorable position in an assumed liberal ‘New World Order’. The ‘civilian power’ label also signaled a certain level of rehabilitation and acceptance of the ‘new’ Germany in the international realm. Most importantly, it mediated between the historical and the forward-looking aspect of a united Germany: on the one hand, the German state had significantly increased in size and formally regained its sovereignty, which required a role identity that acknowledged a more ‘powerful’ player. This needed to be squared, on the other hand, with the aforementioned aversion against appearing ‘powerful’ and the awareness that its European neighbours did not want to see a German ‘return to power’. Contemplations whether unified Germany might now become a ‘world power’ were rejected as outdated realist phantasies (Wolf 1991). Maull’s use of the ‘civilian power’ label caught on precisely because it captured that Germany was less constrained while signaling a commitment to non-militaristic and benign foreign policy. As such, the primary value of the ‘civilian power’ image was to give unified Germany a particular status and provide normative guidance for foreign policy in a liberal world, to constitute a new role identity that codified certain behavioral expectations (Maull 2014a: 125ff).

That said, the concept remained sufficiently vague to invite different readings and, consequently, tensions. Some on the German left read the concept as a variation of the notion of *Friedensmacht* (‘power for peace’) (see Maull 2013; 2014; Volmer 1998; Rinke 2006; Herkendell 2012) while others focused on the means dimension of economic measures as a core element (Linklater 2001). While this parallelism of normativity and economic interests explains much of its appeal in the German discourse, its malleability invited a tension between those who see a ‘civilian power’ as an actor that exercises power exclusively through civilian

means, and those who see it as expressing a commitment to international order or a peaceful world, which does not rule out the use of military force. Thus, with Germany's growing involvement in military missions in the 1990s, especially during the Kosovo conflict, a stronger concern for 'international order' was read into the concept, namely a project of 'civilizing' international relations by various means, including military (Mauß 2000; Tewes 2002). This brought it closer to traditional Atlanticist claims about the West's responsibility for maintaining liberal order (Mauß 2013; 2014). While adjusting the concept in this way was a move to keep it useful, it also signified a break. Thus, when Kundnani (2014: 54) portrays Germany during the Kosovo conflict as an *Ordnungsmacht* which intervened "to maintain the global order", it is difficult to see how this action "strengthened [Germany's] claim to be a civilian power" as it was defined initially.

The concept also can mislead into thinking that 'civilian' means are used only in productive and cooperative ways (in terms of 'power to/with'), while they can just as easily be mobilized to sustain a hierarchy and can have coercive effects (in terms of 'power over'). Yet, as noted earlier, in the German context the 'civilian' label expressed a behavioral principle designating non-military means and goals to alleviate any unease with the image of a unified and sovereign Germany as a 'power'. Because this unease was based on the historical memory that tied German power to military aggression and devastation, it was sufficient to highlight the commitment to 'civilian' means. Just as 'hard' power is conventionally understood in terms of military resources and their use, the contrasting image of 'civilian' power benefits from the evaluative shortcut that assumes its holder to act in benign or non-threatening ways. As such, the concept described and proscribed a practice and, even more so, an attitude grounded in a foreign policy 'culture of restraint' (Berger 1998; Duffield 1998; Malici 2006). The fact that 'civilian' instruments can be used quite effectively to interfere in other states received little attention, also because the political appeal of the prefix sidelined the concept as a category of analysis. Indeed, we might contend that 'civilian power' was not designed for the purpose of carefully assessing how Germany actually exercises power in relational terms. While useful for projecting the image of a benign Germany to domestic and international audiences, it has little to offer when it

comes to evaluating the effects of a 'civilian' approach and the facets (presence or absence) of German *power*.<sup>8</sup>

If 'civilian power' is a cultural orientation defining a set of desirable practices, why would the concept be replaced? This is ultimately a question of how deeply ingrained it is in the minds of the political elite (Mauß 2014: 127-8), government bureaucracies and the German public more broadly (Brummer 2013), what circumstances keep it in place or reduce its appeal. Some argue that Germany's practice of conducting foreign policy through economic means is dependent on the health of its economy, i.e. requires a condition of economic prosperity (Crawford 2007). Others note that acting as a 'civilian power' depends on the existence of a functioning liberal world order, an international environment of global governance with non-coercive and non-military means as principal and effective currencies. Again others claim that Germany's ability to be a civilian power depends on US security guarantees, effectively portraying it as a form of 'free-riding', as a luxury attitude that can only exist under a 'hard power' umbrella (Kagan 2002; Kundnani 2014).

### ***Hegemonic power***

With the gradual escalation of the Eurozone crisis since 2009 we can see the return of a stronger reflection of 'power over' in relation to Germany in political and academic discourse in the form of Germany as a hegemonic power. The discursive landscape is marked by two different readings, both using an assessment of Germany's structural power in Europe as a starting point.

One camp tends to be strongly prescriptive and sees Germany's normative role in Europe as that of a benign hegemon similar to the role of the US during the first decades of the Cold War. According to this perspective, typically drawing conceptually on hegemonic stability theory in the tradition of Charles Kindleberger (1973; 1981), Germany has emerged as a hegemon in Europe and

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<sup>8</sup> Tewes (2002) presents a fruitful use to analyze German foreign policy towards Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, bringing it close to the concept of 'normative power'. Yet, despite fleetingly mentioning Lukes, he does not really offer an analysis of the exercise of *power*.

should therefore accept its hegemonic status as a “special responsibility” (Bukovansky et al, 2012) and new role identity. Yet, while Germany is seen as structurally resembling a hegemon, it fails to embrace that role and is thus depicted as a ‘reluctant hegemon’ (Paterson 2011; Sikorski, 2011; Economist, 2013; Bulmer and Paterson, 2013; 2019) unwilling to practice leadership (Kornelius 2010, 2015; Schönberger 2012, 2013). Voices within this camp, which tend to be based in Britain and the United States, see the main problem in Germany’s lack of will and/or strategic reflection and debate (see Economist, 2013; Hyde-Price, 2015). For historical reasons, so the argument, Germans shy away from leadership and prefer to see their country as a bigger version of Switzerland instead of exercising the power needed for stability in Europe and in the international system. As a consequence, an economically and structurally ‘German-dominated’ but crisis-ridden Europe is adrift without responsible leadership and direction.

In the German discourse references to (benign) hegemony have been used only cautiously and with significant qualifications. While calls for a more proactive foreign policy have received support, Germans have typically been much more sceptical with regards to the country’s ability to fulfil a hegemonic role in Europe as envisioned in the Anglo-American discourse (see e.g. Link, 2012; 2013; Schwarzer and Lang, 2012; Harnisch, 2014). That said, conceptions of ‘leadership’ have gained some prominence in the German discourse in recent years, partly in reaction to Anglo-American views and demands (Harnisch and Schild, 2014). This stands in continuity of previous reflections on ‘*Mitführungsmacht*’ (see Haftendorn 2001: 445) and related labels such as ‘servant leader’ (Mangasarian and Techau 2017), ‘*Zentralmacht*’ (Schwarz 1994), ‘*Führung aus der Mitte*’ (von der Leyen 2015), ‘*Macht in der Mitte*’ (Münkler 2015) or as a ‘responsible power’ (Gauck 2014; Crossley-Frolick 2016; Giegerich and Terhalle 2016). The notion of Germany as a ‘leader’ expressed in these more recent discourses seems compatible with the proactive role of the benign hegemon. Yet its distinct character becomes visible when it spilled-over from the economic realm into the security/military realm, where German conceptions of leadership and power are

significantly more cooperative than the lone hegemon image typically found in the Anglo-American discourse.<sup>9</sup>

The prescriptive ideal of the benign hegemon – or cooperative/joint leadership in German discourse – is contrasted by the image of a coercive hegemon. Here, Germany's structural power is portrayed as a negative form of excessive dominance in Europe serving Germany's narrow self-interests to the detriment of others (Anderson, 2012; Cafruny, 2015; Varoufakis, 2016). Some voices in this camp portray the EU, and the EU monetary system in particular, as a 'tailor-made system' from which Germany profits disproportionately and unduly after successfully uploading its own domestic structures to the European level. Others stress Germany's dominant structural presence as a 'powerhouse' in the European economy producing, through extensive current account surplus, 'negative externalities' and various misallocations in Europe. Still others highlight Germany's significant positional power in Europe as a large, populous and economically strong country located geographically advantageously in the center of Europe ('*Mittellage*') with extensive supply chains deep into Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>10</sup>

While in these structural accounts Germany can appear as exercising power unintentionally and even impersonally (see Gloannec, 2001), the coercive hegemon image often combines references to 'structural dominance' with a selection of statements or actions by particular government officials, prominently ranging from Foreign Minister Genscher's recognition of Croatia in 1992 (see e.g. Crawford, 2007) to Finance Minister Schäuble's role in negotiations with Greece during the Eurozone crisis (see e.g. Varoufakis, 2016) or Volker Kauder's infamous remark at that time that '*Jetzt wird in Europa Deutsch gesprochen*' ('now Europe is speaking German') (see e.g. Anderson, 2012). This image tends to conflate diverse aspects – structural arguments, negotiation tactics, disagreements over policy,

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<sup>9</sup> The cooperative approach is generally illustrated in Germany's close collaboration with France (e.g., Schild, 2010; Fröhlich 2019)

<sup>10</sup> Kundnani (2014) sees Germany as the strongest European 'geo-economic' power but "too weak to be a hegemon", hence taking a "position of semi-hegemony". Kundnani reads this as a continuation of the 'German question'. See also Guerot and Leonard (2011).

attempts to upload domestic policies to the European level, etc – all wrapped into a narrative that depicts a drastic change from Germany as a ‘submissive actor’ with a ‘European vocation’ (Genscher) to ‘a self-confident nation’ which pursues its national interests more directly and ruthlessly ‘without an inferiority complex’ (Schröder) to the evolution of a new coercive German hegemony in a ‘German Europe’ (Beck, 2012; Lever, 2017).<sup>11</sup>

Overall, while the hegemony label became popular during the Eurozone crisis, in both its benign and coercive connotation it was (and remains) primarily used outside Germany. Yet even there it often remains conceptually rather shallow, never really engaging deeper understandings of hegemony based on possessing significantly more resources than the reference group combined with legitimacy, consent and the need of followers (Clark, 2011; Worth, 2015; Stritzel, 2018). Among German authors, the label is seen as problematic, if not dangerous, because it suggests a radical break from the role and foreign policy tradition established after the Second World War. Although the focus on economic affairs softens the image a little, within Germany the meaning of hegemony is historically tied to practices of coercive domination. Thus, it does not easily lend itself to an aspirational image. If anything, due to its negative connotation the image serves as a warning against *appearing* dominant in Europe not least to avoid hostility, resistance and balancing against Germany. At the same time, the notion of joint leadership has gradually been accepted and reflected upon in the German discourse. Especially in the security/military realm German voices have joined into the familiar Anglo-American call for a more ‘proactive’ foreign policy and an increase in defense spending (Mangasarian and Techau 2017; von Marschall 2018; Fröhlich 2019). This has been accompanied by the emergence of a new label.

### ***Shaping Power***

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<sup>11</sup> For studies that argue that this narrative is heavily distorted, see Roos (2012); Harnisch (2014). On the return of historical narratives of the ‘ugly German’ during the Eurozone crisis, see e.g. Bayer (2015). The lack of analytical clarity is especially apparent in discussions that (deliberately) blur the conceptual and political argument, such as Kundnani (2011; 2014). For a conceptual critique of Kundnani’s and Szabo’s reflection on Germany as a geo-economic power, see Maull (2018) and Stritzel (2018).



With ‘civilian power’ stretched to the limit and the ‘hegemon’ image not finding much of a following in Germany’s foreign policy discourse, another concept has emerged: *Gestaltungsmacht*.<sup>12</sup> While the image stands in the continuity of previous reflections and related labels on ‘leadership’, in the specific setting of German discourse it can be seen as a ‘smart pleonasm’ (Hellmann 2013: 17) which gives ‘power’ a positive connotation (*‘Gestalten’*) while avoiding negative connotations of *‘Großmacht’*, *‘Weltmacht’*, ‘hegemon’ and *‘Führungsmacht’*. In its English translation as ‘shaping power’ the label seems to have its first appearance in 2000 (but see already Schwarz 1994), in a book written by three British scholars who drew on Arnold Wolfers to argue that German power is based on the successful diplomacy of shaping its regional, i.e. European, milieu (Bulmer et al. 2000).<sup>13</sup> Hanns Maull then gave the term a prominent place in an essay that strongly criticizes the German government for an insufficient ‘will to shape’, resulting in ‘an erosion of shaping power’ for German foreign policy (Maull 2003). A number of years later, the government published a strategic document in which the concept of ‘shaping power’ is used to conceptualize Germany’s engagement with emerging powers of the Global South (Bundesregierung 2012).<sup>14</sup> By then, the term was increasingly referred to in policy documents and newspaper articles such as by Sandschneider (2012) and in an important multi-author report on German foreign policy jointly published by the *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* and the *German Marshall Fund* (SWP/GMF 2013). The concept was also hailed by prominent external observers like Stephen Szabo who sees Germany as a ‘geo-economic shaping power’ (Szabo 2015, 2017), and found its way into documents by the Foreign Office (AA 2015) and the 2016 Whitebook (discussed below).

All texts advocating the image use it in distinctly aspirational terms, flanked by diagnoses of a ‘changing environment’ and associated pressures: (a) an observation that the world has changed and poses new challenges that require a ‘more active’ German foreign policy, and (b) the demand by allies for Germany to

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<sup>12</sup> There is no straightforward translation into English, the term can be understood as the power to shape, form, configure, or construct. We adopt the commonly used term ‘shaping power’.

<sup>13</sup> That same year, Ralf Dahrendorf claimed in an interview “Europe has no *Gestaltungsmacht*” (Welt 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Szabo (2015: 143) notes that the concept was channeled into the German Foreign Office by Thomas Bagger, head of Policy Planning under both Westerwelle and Steinmeier.

‘step up’ and ‘take more responsibility’, usually (but not only) in terms of increasing military spending and involvement abroad. These diagnoses, also prominent in Frank-Walter Steinmeier’s recollections of his second term as Foreign Minister (Steinmeier 2016), share a narrative of multiple crises in a changing world that require Germany to become ‘more active’ and assume ‘leadership’. In policy interventions and newspaper articles ‘shaping power’ is thus typically used as a placeholder for ‘active engagement’ and for criticizing German foreign policy for no or insufficient ‘activity’. This is usually anchored in a fleeting reference to its ‘actual power’ according to which Germany had to be ‘more active’ in ‘shaping’ the world around it. In these cases, the term appears as little more than a new label for repackaging familiar complaints and demands/agendas and is reminiscent of the prescriptive ideal of a ‘benign’ but ‘reluctant’ hegemon.<sup>15</sup>

Thus far, there has not been a wider move to establish ‘shaping power’ as a distinct *concept*, perhaps also because advocates disagree on what a ‘shaping power’ should do/be. It is variably defined as pursuing one’s own economic interests rather than being driven by values, as showing ‘flexibility’ and not being constrained by multilateralism or cherished bilateral relations (Sandschneider 2012), or as pursuing a ‘networked’ approach of investing in relationships and reform of international organizations (SWP/GMF), especially using economic networks to solve problems (Szabo 2017). Markus Kaim claimed that ‘Germany is becoming a shaping power in the Middle East’ when the government was sending six Tornado reconnaissance jets to Syria (Zeit 2015) and Dirk Messner used the term to discuss challenges and opportunities in advancing sustainable development on a global level (Messner 2015). Given this array of uses, it is instructive to take a brief look at the two strategic documents by the German government, the aforementioned 2012 document *‘Globalisierung gestalten – Partnerschaften ausbauen – Verantwortung teilen’* and the 2016 Whitebook issued by the German Ministry of Defense.

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<sup>15</sup> Or the image of a *‘Weltmacht wider Willen’*, revived by a lead article in *Der Spiegel* (2018)

In the 2012 document, German power is mainly expressed through a global governance model of power in a complex, dynamic and polycentric world of globalization to which states must constantly adapt. In this world, power is diffused and entails/requires influencing and shaping policy processes with other actors that are willing and able to engage in processes of building coalitions and shaping an 'evolving consensus'. In acknowledging the limited ability to define or 'impose' policy outcomes similar to the previous civilian power label, *Gestaltungsmacht* is essentially defined as *kooperative Mitgestaltungsmacht*.<sup>16</sup> The term is difficult to translate literally but it appears in frequent references to Germany as a '*Mitgestalter*' (page 7), '*Förderer*' (page 8), or '*Gestaltungspartner*' (page 59), which almost suggests that Germany is just 'assisting' in broader 'shaping' processes, rather than taking a leading role.

Although the term is not used in the final document of the 2016 Whitebook, the strategic treatise for German security policy published by the Ministry of Defense roughly every decade,<sup>17</sup> the concept has a central function in the presentation of Germany's 'new role' and is expressed in prominent frames regarding Germany's 'claim to shape' (*Gestaltungsanspruch*), the 'realms (in and through which) to shape' (*Gestaltungsbereiche*) and its 'ability to shape' (*Gestaltungsfähigkeit*) (Weissbuch 2016).<sup>18</sup> The governance model of 'foreign policy making in a globalized world' expressed in the 2012 document is here paraphrased in terms of movements within sets of networks (*Netzwerkansatz*), the preferred term in Germany's official security discourse for several years, and as closely entangled with interests of and policies by friends and allies. While the Whitebook makes several references to leadership, it qualifies this as assuming roles in multinational peace operations as a 'framework nation' or as a 'lead and host-nation' (Weissbuch 2016: 68). Where the document does articulate an autonomous '*Gestaltungsanspruch*' of Germany (p. 138) this is embedded in

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<sup>16</sup> This is slightly misrepresented particularly in Hellmann (2013) but also (2016).

<sup>17</sup> The draft of the Whitebook reportedly explicitly declared Germany a 'shaping power' (FAZ 2016).

<sup>18</sup> The 2006 Whitebook already attributed Germany 'an important role in the shaping of Europe and beyond' (Weissbuch 2006: 8).

references to increased expectations from partners that generate the 'duty' and 'responsibility' for Germany to be more active.

Conceptually speaking, these documents present *Gestaltungsmacht* as a creative activity that involves encouraging and facilitating cooperation without doing so from a position of superiority. Acknowledging the 'reality' of a stronger Germany and the demand for taking on more responsibility, shaping power occurs in a polycentric and complex world in which no single actor can provide public goods unilaterally. So while elements of the benign hegemony discourse are visible, *Gestaltungsmacht* does not occur within a configuration of hierarchy, but within cooperative and networked relationships. As Foreign Minister Heiko Maas emphasized in the *Bundestag* "our international shaping power stands and falls, above all, with the coherence/solidarity [*Geschlossenheit*] of Europe" (Maas 2018). Blending into *Mitgestaltungsmacht*, it is a clear expression of 'power to/with'. So rather than reading 'shaping power' as a semantic cousin of 'great power' and embedded in the realist paradigm (Hellmann et al 2016: 216), there appear to be more overlaps with 'civilian power' (Mauß 2018). That said, there are also notable differences. Whereas in Mauß's account civilian powers were boldly portrayed as 'prototypes' of a new type of actor in a liberal world where military power has lost much of its appeal, the *Gestaltungsmacht* role lacks this optimistic and ambitious connotation. Instead, it is situated in a polycentric world where liberal order has been exposed as fragile and, thus, is concerned with ensuring the proper functioning of a 'rule-based international order'. The documents also note that Germany's ability to 'shape' are limited, with the Whitebook cautioning that Germany is currently 'neither sufficiently attuned nor prepared in a sustainable manner' to live up to this role (Weissbuch 2016: 137, also 23). In this sense, shaping power does have a 'realistic' tenor.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis has shown a gradual evolution of the notion of Germany as a 'power', with the emergence of each role image influenced by (a reading of) the international political context Germany finds itself in: for the *constrained power* image, this context was a post-war system that (deliberately) limited German

power; the *civilian power* role presented unified Germany as part and parcel of a process of positive change in a liberal post-Cold War world; the *hegemon* image expressed ambivalence of Germany regaining a 'central place' in Europe, with the negative connotation coming to fore during the Eurocrisis; and the *shaping power* label situates Germany in a challenging and changing (post-American) world, which it has to adjust to and navigate with others. Not surprisingly, the European context is central to all these role images. While the evolution shows a trend towards depicting a 'stronger' Germany, there is notable overlap amongst the concepts underpinning these role images (with the obvious exception of the *coercive hegemon*). New labels do not signify a radical replacement of the previous one. Instead, the meaning content has changed gradually.

At least among German authors, acceptable role images portray German 'power' as benign and cooperative and, hence, must contrast with the historical memory of Germany as a dominant and violent force. Thus, these role images have a significant normative dimension and are often depicted as an aspiration. Future research might want to assess more carefully to what extent German political elites actually identify with these roles and draw on them to guide and justify their foreign policy positions/decisions. Carrying this further, it would be important to know to what extent a particular role is recognized externally, i.e. by other governments. Noteworthy in this regard is that the formulation of all the role images outlined here is tied to an understanding what Germany's power 'actually' is or should be. This may sound trivial, yet the link is not always clear. In fact, the texts advancing these role images tend to convey simplistic (if not misleading) understandings of 'power' in terms of resources and practices. Much of their meaning is drawn from the prefix (constrained, civilian, shaping, etc), with little attention paid to the *concept* of power, in particular its expression in relational form. One might argue that political discourse does not need such deeper understanding, yet intuitive associations are not enough if these images are used for guiding, predicting and assessing the impact of foreign policy practices.

This is also important for the question whether in shaping power we are currently witnessing the emergence of a new basic concept for German foreign policy. We

agree with Hellmann (2017) that *Gestaltungsmacht* has intuitive appeal, as *Gestalten* gives 'power' a positive connotation. The documents analyzed above indicate that 'shaping power' is a form of 'power with/to', a creative force that works through cooperation and which can be contrasted with a 'power over' configuration. Yet while it may nicely tie in with existing labels and their conceptual webs, 'shaping power' needs a distinct profile to gain further traction. It has to offer more than a pragmatic way of navigating a complex world; it also needs a normative vision. Moreover, its political, policy-oriented expressions should be complemented by careful theoretical treatments of it as something relational and dynamic. That way, *Gestaltungsmacht* may become not only a substantive role image that can position and guide German foreign policy, but also a useful analytical category that can show us how 'shaping' takes place, who 'shapes' and what is being 'shaped'. And then we might see that Germany has been a 'shaping power' all along.

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